Chapter 4
Driving into the Gap:  
Decision-Making for Infusing  
Technology in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the perceptions of technology held by professionals in two distinctly different districts in the Midwest. Drawing upon Deanna Bogdan’s work with the gap and continuum theories, as well as the influential work of Marshall McLuhan, the authors identify how the perceptions surrounding student behavior, technology, and schools’ roles in society shape districts’ approaches to technology access and use. Underlying all the decisions about technology access is the perception of the school’s role in society. In an educational environment that has traditionally defined teachers as gatekeepers of information, technology can provide an interesting dilemma. Positioning technology as an issue of literacy may open a path that makes it easier for schools to travel (Cuban, 2001; Demetriadis, et al., 2003; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009). In doing so, teachers can provide students with navigational tools that will guide them toward success in the ever-changing, globally connected world.

INTRODUCTION

Cruising down the interstate toward Metrotown and its schools, I watch as the scenery gradually changes from freshly constructed shopping centers and restaurants to buildings battered and bruised by time and an ebbing economy. Technically, I have never left the suburbs of this large midwestern city, yet the contrast between suburbs is stark. Metrotown, and its surrounding towns, possesses a feeling that differs greatly from the suburbs I have known and lived in. Despite its suburban classification, Metrotown feels as if it is gradually transitioning to a more urban culture. Some of this can be attributed to the population itself. Metrotown accommodates a diverse mix of citizens, many who feel the financial crunch, as indicated by nearly 44% of the district’s students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (State Department of Education). Perhaps the age of the city also lends itself to this impression.

I have not come to Metrotown, however, to examine its architecture or even the quality of its schools. Rather, I am on a search to understand
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the district’s view and usage of technology. So as I enter the bustling halls of Metrotown High, the first stop on my journey, I pay close attention to evidence of its existence as I walk toward the office. The absence of iPods, mp3 players, and cell phones is notable as I search the hands and ears of the students I pass. Upon entering the office, however, I notice a young man using the phone. A small white cord trails from his other ear, signaling the existence of the tiny ear buds associated with the small music players. Next to him, the secretary waits for him to finish his conversation with his parent, and then asks him politely to remove the player in school. This exchange provides me with my first indication on the school’s stance on the use of personal technology, a stance I will continue to explore as I visit with members of this school community.

Weeks later, I drive a lonelier stretch of highway to a town almost 350 miles away from Metrotown and more than 150 miles from a major metropolis. Ruralville feels like a step back in time. Like Metrotown, many of its buildings have stood for more than 100 years. Yet, there are more differences than similarities. In Metrotown, most of the diversity within the schools is exhibited through the African American population. Ruralville, too, would be considered diverse, but its district attendees are comprised of nearly 70% Hispanic students, a number that differs greatly from the rest of the state, which is comprised of more than 73% whites. And poverty clings to this town with more than 70% of Ruralville’s students classified as economically disadvantaged (State Department of Education).

The differences that characterize this site, including its location, draw me to this community. Would its approach to technology differ, as well? Like my earlier visit to Metrotown, I pay close attention to evidence of technology as I enter the high school. Obviously, classes have started. The halls are bare, but I spy large monitors gracing the walls of the lunchroom, evidence that technology is seen as important despite the tight funding. Later, I venture into the halls during passing period. Immediately, I notice students with cell phones to their ears. This sight confirms what I had learned in my earlier conversations: Ruralville views technology very differently than Metrotown.

In my experiences working within schools and talking with colleagues, the discrepancy in district use of technology is not all that unusual. The landscape that makes up America’s schools is painted with peaks of schools filling their classrooms and curriculum with technology and valleys that highlight its absence. In this instance, hundreds of miles separate Metrotown and Ruralville. At times, one may only cross the street to find oneself in a district that holds distinctly different views. The question becomes, then, how are the perceptions held by district professionals represented in their approaches to accessing technology?

As I spent time in both districts, the viewpoints that shaped their approaches became more visible with each person I spoke with. In terms of technology access, they rested on opposite ends of the spectrum, yet they recognized that not all schools viewed the issue in the same way. Early in my visits to Metrotown and before stepping foot in Ruralville, I sat down with the high school principal who foreshadowed much of what I would discover: “Our district is probably more restrictive than others you’re going to talk to. We tend to lock things down rather than having it open and dealing with the issue, with kids getting into it, a little more conservative than others.” It seemed I had discovered two districts that could offer me insight into both sides of the issue, which could, perhaps, bring me closer to understanding why schools broach technology in varying ways. This chapter first explores the different stances adopted by these two districts, and then explores how helping schools redefine technology integration as an issue of literacy rather than simply looking at technology as a tool of content delivery can help bridge the gap that exists between schools so that students are better equipped to compete in an increasingly global world.